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HD set-top box review

A high-definition set-top box is an inexpensive way to upgrade to digital TV.

Updated: 13 Oct 2011 | Author: Chris Ruggles | : Member rating

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01 .Introduction

We review 14 HD set-top boxes priced from $69 to $150.

High definition (HD) set-top boxes are designed to replace your existing television's tuner.

If you have an older analogue TV, the box will give you the option of watching digital programming (find out more about preparing for the transition in CHOICE's guide to digital TV), and if you have an LCD or plasma TV with a standard definition digital tuner (or none at all) it will allow you to watch the HD channels.

Set-top boxes are a small part of the big change to digital TV. They play an important role because they are a cheap and relatively easy way to get more channels, increased picture quality and often better reception.

In this updated test we've added nine new models to the five still available from our last test, as well as a looking over a couple that are supplied under the Digital Switchover Household Assistance Scheme (HAS) and a Bush BHAS03 talking set-top box, which is now available for people who have vision problems.

Check out our reliability survey to see which set-top boxes last the distance.

Models tested

- Akai AD163X
- Akai AD175X
- Bush DFTA46R
- Bush DFTA50FVE
- Bush DFTA16HD
- Digitel+ HD3300
- Grundig GSTB3106HD
- Grundig GSTB4101FVE
- Phoenix JT8000HD
- STRONG SRT 5431
- TEAC HDB849
- TOPFIELD TBF7200
- TOPPRO TP1500
- Wintal STB10HD

How we test

Ease of use Our tester, James Thomson, assesses each STB for its user manual, initial setup and tuning, remote control and on-screen controls as well as on-board displays and controls.
Performance Our lab checks each model's HD tuner for reception performance in areas with a good quality signal, as well as areas where reception is less than ideal and where reception might be affected by appliances such as a dryer or vacuum cleaner.
Standby energy James connects each STB to a regulated power supply and power meter and records its standby energy consumption as well as its energy consumption when in use.

Chris Ruggles puts the Bush Talking Set Top Box through its paces.

Talking set-top boxes

Many vision impaired people value television as a form of communication. However, the difficulties they encounter with controlling a TV, or set-top box can be very frustrating.

Bush Australia has been working with the Digital Switchover Taskforce and Vision Australia to bring to market a talking set-top box (BHAS03, $199). We believe Hills Holdings will also have one that will come to market sometime in the future.

You can choose to use the talking feature, which will speak the menus and commands in an Australian accent, or leave the feature off and use it as a normal set-top box.

Unfortunately we couldn't get one in time for our technical reception tests, but it performed quite well in our ease of use assessment without the talking feature enabled.

We contacted a number of Vision Australia clients who've been using versions of this STB for some months and generally their reactions to it are very positive.

However, there are some minor quibbles; the voice can mispronounce some words and lacks smoothness at times, which can make it hard to follow with complicated things such as the electronic program guide. Also the Help button could be easier to locate.

The spoken key learn feature got high praise and could be a useful feature for all set-top boxes. In future there's a possibility that we'll have broadcast audio description of what is happening on the screen and set-top boxes like the BHAS03 will handle this as well.

CHOICE independence is guaranteed

These independent ratings are only available through membership with CHOICE Online - because no one test products like we do. Arm yourself with our unique and exclusive information so you can make your next purchase with confidence.

02.Digital safety net

Australia is switching to digital TV and by 2013, all analog signals will be switched off.

Currently, free-to-air TV is broadcast in both analog and digital, but the analog signals will be gradually phased out, region by region, across Australia.

For the majority of people, making the switch to digital TV is a relatively straightforward and inexpensive exercise. However, the Australian Government understands that some people may need help to get ready for digital TV.

The Household Assistance Scheme (HAS) is available for people that receive a full-rate pension, which includes:

- The Disability Support Pension
- Age Pension
- Carer Payment
- DVA Service Pension
- DVA Income Support Supplement

A letter will be sent from Centrelink to full-rate pensioners about six months before each region is due to switchover. Eligible people will receive, free of charge, a high definition set-top box, installation of the set-top box, a demonstration of the equipment and 12 months warranty, service and technical support.

For more information about the HAS visit the Digital Ready website www.digitalready.gov.au.

The Bush BHAS01UR and Hills HD94003C are currently being supplied under the HAS scheme in Queensland. Both boxes are easy

to use, scoring 69% or more in our tests and have OK tuners, which means they'll handle most situations well.

We were impressed with the HD94003C's remote control, but using the controls on the front can get you stuck in a menu and have to turn the box off to get out.

Switchover

As the analog signal is gradually switched off forever around the country, consumers must decide whether to buy a TV with a digital tuner or opt for a considerably less expensive set-top box (STB).

All STBs on test can display all the free-to-air channels available in your part of the country, including the high-definition (HD) ones.

However, should you connect one to an analog TV, you'll most likely have to deal with a letterbox effect – black bars at the top and bottom of the screen – because most digital broadcasts are in 16:9 format, whereas analog TVs are 4:3.

Also, while you'll be able to watch HD programs, most analog TVs can't reproduce the detail in a HD picture, so you'll be watching them in standard definition.

03.What to buy

2 CHOICE buys

Digitel HD3300

Scored 74/100 | $79

74%

Good points:

- Good digital tuner performance.
- Records to USB.
- Plays video and sound files, and displays still pictures from USB.
- Highest ease of use score.
- Well organised on screen interface.
- Good front panel controls.

Bad points:

- No firmware upgrade capability.

Bush DFTA50FVE

Scored 71/100 | $119

71%

Good points:

- Over the air firmware upgrade.
- Good user manual.

Bad points:

- USB port for firmware upgrade only.
- No front panel controls.
- No front panel display.

04.Compare results

Instructions

Comparison table list

By default ALL tested products are listed. You can select up to five items to view in a side by side comparison.
Additional columns can be viewed by using the Next/Previous buttons.

Using the filters

Use the filters to show only products that meet your specific requirements or which have the specific features you're interested in. Selecting filters automatically updates the Comparison table list.
The number shown in brackets represents the number of products that will be shown if you select that filter.
You can view additional filters by selecting the Show more filters button.

Make a selection

Filters

Brand

- Akai (2)
- Bush (3)
- Digitel+ (1)
- Grundig (2)
- Phoenix (1)
- STRONG (1)
- TEAC (1)
- TOPFIELD (1)
- TOPPRO (1)
- Wintal (1)

Price ($)

- $0 - $100 (8)
- $101 - $150 (6)
- $151 - $200 (0)

Standby energy consumption (W)

- Low (4)
- Medium (10)
- High (0)

Other media playback from USB device

- No (6)
- Yes (8)

Records to USB device

- No (7)
- Yes (7)

Compare products

Select up to 5 items below. Then click the compare button	Price ($)	Overall Score	Ease Of Use (%)	Tuner performance (%)	Standby energy score (%)	Standby energy consumption (W)	Annual energy cost ($)
Digitel+ HD3300 #	79	74	75	71	80	0.56	3.6
Bush DFTA50FVE #	119	71	68	67	100	0.32	3.8
Akai AD175X #	130	69	68	72	60	0.75	4.1
Akai AD163X #	150	68	68	70	60	0.79	4.2
Wintal STB10HD	80	68	64	64	100	0.32	4.1
Bush DFTA46R #	85	67	65	67	80	0.59	3.1
Grundig GSTB4101FVE	129	67	65	61	100	0.34	4
Phoenix JT8000HD	100	67	61	70	80	0.57	5.4
STRONG SRT 5431 #	69	67	67	63	80	0.52	2.6
TEAC HDB849	69	65	61	65	80	0.52	3.7

Select up to 5 items below. Then click the compare button	Price ($)	Overall Score	Ease Of Use (%)	Tuner performance (%)	Standby energy score (%)	Standby energy consumption (W)	Annual energy cost ($)
Grundig GSTB3106HD #	80	65	61	66	80	0.69	2.7
TOPPRO TP1500 #	129	65	73	56	60	0.78	3.8
TOPFIELD TBF7200 #	109	64	68	51	100	0.42	5
Bush DFTA16HD	70	60	55	66	60	0.73	3

How we test

Ease of use Our tester, Scott O'Keefe, assesses each STB for its user manual, initial setup and tuning, remote control and on-screen controls as well as on-board displays and controls.
Performance Our lab checks each model's HD tuner for reception performance in areas with a good quality signal, as well as areas where reception is less than ideal and where reception might be affected by appliances such as a dryer or vacuum cleaner.
Standby energy Scott connects each STB to a regulated power supply and power meter and records its standby energy consumption.

Using the table

Scores The overall score is made up of: Ease of use: 50%; Digital tuner performance: 40%; Standby energy consumption: 10%.

Annual energy cost is calculated on five hours' use and 19 hours in standby each day for 365 days at 20 cents per kWh.

Price Recommended retail, as of December 2010.

Table notes * Rounded up to the nearest half cm. ** Rounded to the nearest 100g.

05.What to look for

Connections You can expect a variety of connections on set-top boxes, ranging from some that are common to all, such as HDMI and component, to less common ones such as a USB for playing music or picture files.

Antenna pass-through allows you to connect another device to the antenna without going through the STB processor. This is handy if you want to attach an analog device such as a VCR at the same time, but will be less useful when the analog signal is turned off.

Sizes also vary considerably, so check the dimensions in the table.

The **remote control** may take the place of your TV's remote, so it's handy if it can perform some basic functions such as turning the TV off or changing the volume. Some of these can be a real mixed bag of dark lettering on a black remote, smallish text and odd designs that don't fit well in your hand. To reduce clutter you may want to invest in a simple universal remote to control all your media devices.

On-screen menus should be easy to read and logical in format. An on-screen guide to the remote control buttons allows you to easily check the functions that you use only occasionally.

USB extra

Of the STBs on test, the Akai's, Bush DFTA46R, Digitel+, STRONG, TEAC and TOPPRO are capable of recording to a USB device, which may be handy if you occasionally want to record a program. We put them through our DVR tests and found none are easy to use in this mode, nor do they have all the functions you'd expect in a DVR. We don't recommend any of them as an alternative to a DVR. The scores for this function are not included in the overall score.